

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Response from the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

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Introduction

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs) are the UK's largest single provider of mobility and other rehabilitation training for blind and partially sighted people. Each year, we help thousands of visually impaired clients to negotiate public transport, either with a guide dog or long cane.

Our vision is for a world in which all people who are blind and partially sighted enjoy the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as everyone else. We campaign for equal access to transport and the built environment, shops and services, health and social care.

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, welcomes the chance to respond to the Enterprise and Learning Committee's inquiry on the Future railway infrastructure in Wales: We have restricted our comments to the key issues for blind and partially sighted people, although any improvement in the accessibility, reliability and speed of services in Wales would clearly be of great benefit as rail travel is vital to the independent safe mobility of blind and partially sighted people.

With regard to developing more extensive, faster and more effective rail links for Wales: Blind and partially sighted people have limited access to private transport and so rail is often their means of reaching destinations which many sighted people would travel to by car. In addition, trains depart from and travel to set points which are more prominent and therefore easier to locate than bus stops, and may be linked to other transport modes to facilitate the continuation of a journey. Ensuring that rail services are integrated with other forms of public transport is essential to facilitate location of bus stops and taxi services within an accessible and easily negotiable environment. This might mean the provision of guidance paths within the station itself and appropriate tactile surfaces at road crossings outside.

"I found my way out of the station using my cane and following the crowd off the train, but once we got outside everyone wandered off and I couldn't find a taxi or anyone to ask. It was pouring with rain and all I could hear was the traffic, people rushing by, I stood there for a while then turned back to where I thought the station entrance was, but all I could find was a bin, and it took me a while to locate the doors again. When I did a nice man asked if I was ok and took me to the taxi rank, I was very wet and cold!"

Mr. H. Swansea

We are concerned that the term "integration" used extensively in the National Transport Plan (NTP) should apply equally to pedestrians as to vehicles, so that, for example, crossing a busy road outside a rail station is made safer by the installation of a controlled, not a Zebra or courtesy crossing.

With regard to new stations, Those that already exist present considerable challenges to the independent safe mobility of blind and partially sighted people: There is no consistent approach to the provision of appropriate tactile surfaces to mark the edge of platforms so that falling off onto the track is always a danger, and a reason frequently given by blind and partially sighted people for not travelling by train. Among the others are how difficult it is to find a safe route from the entrance to the ticket barrier, for although a blind or partially sighted passenger might have booked assistance, the person providing help has first to be located. Station concourses are large flat open spaces surrounded by service points, entrances and exits, and there is no clear guidance path to aid orientation from one point to another. Unmanned stations, of which there are 220 in Wales, present even more difficulties: The Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) requires there to be at least one member of staff available and freed up from other duties to provide guidance. In Wales, 10 stations have only part time staff, and 23 have only ticket offices, so Although it is the policy of Arriva Trains Wales to notify passengers of this via their website or when they book tickets, it still means that a blind or partially sighted person may not alight at an unmanned station unless they are absolutely certain of their route from the platform to the exit, and how they will get to their eventual destination.

Arriva make a commendable adjustment to alleviate the problem of unmanned stations by offering free transport for any passenger who might find it difficult to manage alone. The APRS staff can arrange for a passenger to alight at a manned station instead, and provide

free transport back to the passenger's chosen destination. This service is not, however, widely advertised even though it might make it possible to travel alone without fear of being stranded.

"I booked help a week in advance as I was catching an early train. When I arrived at 5:30 am, the place was deserted. If I'd known nobody would be around I would have known what to expect, but when I complained they said that the information didn't reach them till 9 am, so nobody was there to help me".

Mrs. E. Blackwood

It is essential that the provision of audio and visual announcements on stations and trains is maintained, along with a commitment to the quality, accuracy and reliability of announcements. Some blind and partially sighted passengers on the "heart of Wales" and "Valleys" service report a failure to make announcements, forcing them to depend on passengers to tell them when they reach their stop. The fact remains, however, that circumstances beyond the control of blind and partially sighted travelers sometimes mean that they can be totally lost and possibly in danger, which is why the provision of well trained staff is so essential: Some blind and partially sighted passengers on the "heart of Wales" and "Valleys" service report a failure to make announcements, forcing them to depend on passengers to tell them when they reach their stop. The fact remains, however, that circumstances beyond the control of blind and partially sighted travelers sometimes mean that they can be totally lost and possibly in danger, which is why the provision of well trained staff is so essential:

"I stood on the platform where my regular train comes in. There was an announcement saying that the train would now come in on a different platform. Suddenly there was nobody around, I hadn't asked for help as it was my regular journey, but I don't know how to get to platforms I don't use and I missed my hospital appointment".

Mrs. B. Cardiff

Arriva provide disability awareness training for all their staff at induction which is refreshed on a yearly basis. They also provide a free extra space for passengers travelling with Guide Dogs to ensure that the dog can lie on the floor beside its owner without fear of being stepped on or kicked.

With reference to the allocation of more powers over rail services for the Welsh Assembly Government, being able to directly fund railway infrastructure would allow prioritisation and co-ordination. For example, schemes such as the Station Improvement plan and Access for All could be linked with the NTP and Regional Transport Plans (RTPs). Currently, we would suggest that there is a lack of correlation between schemes prioritised by the RTPs, how they fit within the framework of the NTP, and what specific contribution they can make to better integrated, more inclusive and accessible rail service to passengers.